

Perso-Indica: a critical survey of Persian works on Indian learned traditions

Indo-Islamic rulers often pursued their political claims precisely through gathering knowledge about Indian sciences and literatures. Perhaps the greatest legacy of these projects is a vast cache of Persian texts that examine numerous aspects of South Asia's deep intellectual traditions. Perso-Indica aims to produce a comprehensive survey of these writings that will be the first major reference work of its kind and will advance our understanding of Indian cultural processes across languages and traditions.

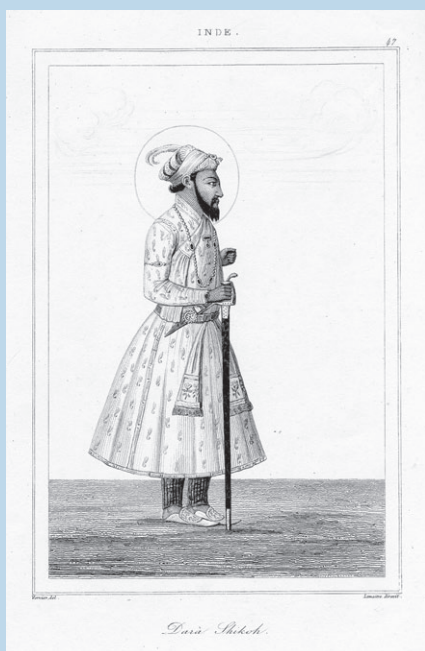
Audrey Truschke

PERSIAN TEXTS that investigate Indian learning constitute one of the most extensive and least studied cross-cultural endeavors in world history. Persian-speakers came to South Asia beginning in the late twelfth century, with successive waves of Muslim dynasties that transformed the political landscape of the subcontinent. Different Muslim groups rose to power during the next seven centuries, and many of these polities patronized Persian as a language of literature and empire. Simultaneously, these rulers engaged with the variety of literary cultures claimed by their subjects, including Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Kashmiri, Tamil, and other tongues.

Scope

The Persian texts addressed in this project include direct translations (frequently of Sanskrit texts), adaptations of Indic knowledge, and original treatises. When completed, the Critical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions will cover as many as three hundred texts produced over the course of seven hundred years, from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries. The works address an astonishing array of subjects, such as religion, philosophy, mythology, astrology, astronomy, mysticism, history, sciences, arts, geography, flora, fauna, cuisine, etc. Muslim and Hindu scholars alike authored these probing inquiries, both under direct royal patronage and far beyond the confines of the court. Their treatments of Indian ideas are often remarkably sophisticated, in addition to frequently being tied with imperial objectives. Taken altogether, this body of literature enacted the most substantial importation of knowledge systems from a non-Islamic tradition since the adaptation of Greek knowledge into Arabic several centuries earlier. In-depth analyses of such a wide-ranging, long-lived translation movement promise to elucidate the nature of cross-cultural relations in India and the growth of Indo-Persian culture and power.

This literature can be divided into three eras that exhibit discernible intellectual trends and also loosely map onto political developments. The first phase coincides with the Delhi Sultanate, a series of dynasties that ruled parts of northern India from the early thirteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. During this period, intellectuals were largely concerned with the sciences, although poets such as Amir Khusraw participated in an emerging composite culture that fused Indic and Islamic ideas. Next, the advent of Mughal rule in 1526 inaugurated an explosion of Indo-Persian literary output devoted to a greater range of disciplines. During the next two hundred or so years, many authors undertook direct translations of Sanskrit texts under imperial orders, and Muslim authors explored how to incorporate Indian knowledge into their own thought worlds. The third era corresponds with the colonial period when the British elite often sought access to Indian texts through Persian translations and treatises. In these endeavors, the colonialists often employed Indian secretaries to help them locate and understand their desired materials, which added another cross-cultural layer to the transfer of knowledge. Perso-Indica hopes to add greater detail to this broad sketch of epochs and also to articulate the implications of these different stages for how we write the history of pre-modern, early modern, and colonial India.

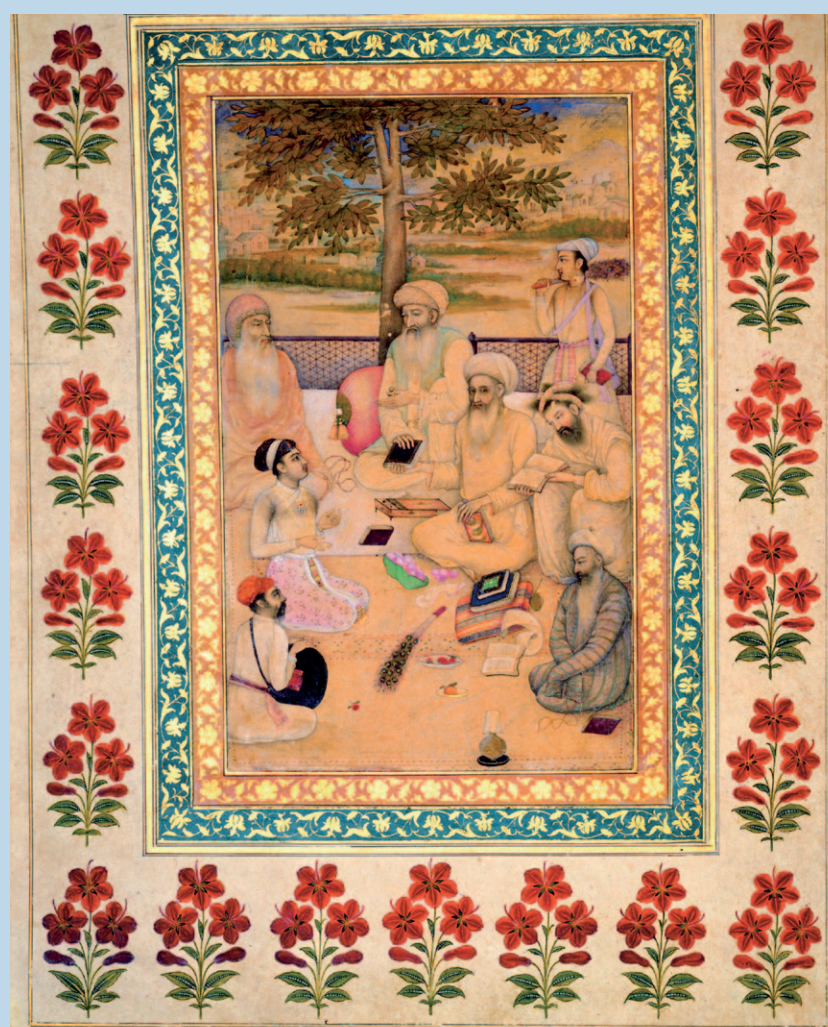


Above: Sketch of The Imperial Prince Dara Shikuh (1615-1659); privately owned.

Top right: The Demon Host Begins the Battle, illustration from Persian translation of the Ramayana; © Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1907.271.225.

Below right: A Young Prince With Mystics © Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Geneva, AKM00498.

Far right: Rama and Laksmana Confront the Demons Marica and Subahu, illustration from Persian translation of the Ramayana; © Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1907.271.38.





In addition to contributing to our understanding of a largely forgotten aspect of India's past, Perso-Indica is relevant to modern South Asia as well. In many ways, India's present and future is being shaped in the context of debates about its past as people increasingly look to earlier ways of navigating a diverse cultural landscape. Multiethnic dynasties such as the Mughals feature vividly in contemporary historical memory across the subcontinent and are frequently invoked in modern political, aesthetic, and social realms. In particular, Hindu-Muslim tensions over the past few decades have highlighted the need for serious, sustained work on other ways of negotiating cultural and religious differences. Perso-Indica will provide a firm historical basis for further scholarly work on these issues.

Vision and method

The survey is divided into different domains of study (e.g., literature, astrology, music, etc.). The sections then contain multiple entries arranged in ascending chronological order or, in the absence of a clear date, according to approximate time period. Each entry is devoted to an individual text or author/translator and is based on direct examination of primary sources, either published or in manuscript format, along with a review of secondary scholarship. All entries will convey pertinent biographical information about the author, a summary of the text, the Indian sources referenced therein, and printed editions of the work. In order to facilitate further academic work, entries may also list the extant manuscript(s), illustrated copies, and modern translations. Among the fundamental aims of the project is to develop an extensive system for acquiring metadata about texts, authors, translators, dedicatees, patrons, sources (manuscripts and lithographs), etc. This information can then be used to generate indexes and will facilitate quantitative and qualitative analyses. We hope that gathering such data will enable us to ascertain large scale trends and other types of information about this group of texts as a whole.

Despite the importance of these materials, many texts and authors addressed in the survey have been neglected and unstudied for decades. Perso-Indica hopes to renew academic interest by collecting information on these works and articulating each text's particular import. In accordance with its goal of raising the profile of these materials, the project strives to offer the widest possible access to its data, and so the format of the survey is electronic. While our envisioned audience is primarily the academic community, we also wish to serve any public interest in these topics, and all information will be freely available online.

Institutional structure

Perso-Indica is an international research and publishing project that brings together people and institutions from across the globe. The project is based in Paris at the University Sorbonne Nouvelle (Mixed Research Unit 7528 'Mondes iraniens et indiens') and is directed by Fabrizio Speziale (University Sorbonne Nouvelle), Carl W. Ernst (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and Svevo D'Onofrio (University of Bologna). A team of international research scholars from Europe, North America, and Asia is editing the survey entries.

In addition to the online survey, Perso-Indica plans to foster direct intellectual exchanges by bringing scholars to Paris through visiting fellowships at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, offered with the support of the Fondation Colette Caillat of the Institut de France. There are two month-long positions available during the 2011-2012 academic year that are open to exceptional scholars from any country currently conducting innovative research on subjects related to *Perso-Indica*. In addition, the project is planning its first international conference 30-31 May 2012 in Paris, that will assemble many of the editors and contributors for the survey in an attempt to foster ongoing conversations about the role played by this movement of texts and knowledge systems from Indian traditions into Persian.

The website for Perso-Indica (www.perso-indica.net) was launched in 2010 with the support of the Institut Français de Recherche en Iran (Tehran) and the Iran Heritage Foundation (London). Additionally, from 2011 to 2016 it will receive support from the research funds of French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) Higher Education Chair in Iranian Studies at the University Sorbonne Nouvelle Mixed Research Unit 7528 'Mondes iraniens et indiens', which comprises scholars from the CNRS, Sorbonne-Nouvelle, École Pratique des Hautes Études, and Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales. The database will be hosted by TGE Adonis (www.tge-adonis.fr), a platform run by the CNRS.

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